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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the accuracy of teachers' abilities to identify problem children. Ninety-five third grade children served as subjects. Teachers designated each child as a conduct problem, withdrawal problem, or normal, resulting in 16, 14, and 65 children being assigned to the three groups. Behavioral observations, peer sociometric ratings, and academic achievement scores were collected. The results indicated that conduct problem children differed from normal children on behavioral, sociometric, and academic measures whereas withdrawn children differed from normals on the latter two measures. Conduct problem and withdrawal problem children did not differ on any of the outcome measures. The results suggest that teachers can identify children who are having difficulties in class but may be less accurate in differentiating between different types of problem children. (Author/MP)

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Accuracy of Teacher Nominations of Child Behavior Problems[1]

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the accuracy of teachers identification of problem children. Ninety-five third grade children served as subjects. Teachers nominated children as a conduct problem, withdrawal problem or normal, resulting in 16, 14, and 65 children being assigned to the three groups. Behavioral observations, peer sociometric ratings, and academic achievement scores were collected. The results indicated that conduct problem children differed from normal children on behavioral, sociometric, and academic measures whereas withdrawn children differed from normals on the latter two measures. Conduct problem and withdrawal problem children did not differ on any of the outcome measures. The results suggest that teachers can identify children who are having difficulties in class but may be less accurate in differentiating between different types of problem children.

The accuracy of teachers' perception of children's behavior is of critical importance. Except for parents, teachers probably have more opportunity than anyone to observe the behavioral characteristics of children. Consequently, teachers are looked upon by parents and mental health personnel to facilitate the identification of problem children. Yet surprisingly few studies have validiated teacher's perception of students with criterion measures of child behavior.

Walker (1970) investigated the relationship between teacher ratings of child behavior and external measures of behavioral disturbance. Teacher ratings were obtained on 534 fourth, fifth and sixth grade children. These children were then screened for meeting one or more of the following criteria: (1) referred to a mental health professional; (2) educational provisions made for the child within the school because of behavior problem(s); or (3) received instructions at home because of the child's inability to profit from classroom instruction due to the child's behavior problem(s). Thirty-eight pupils (7%) of the total sample met one or more of these criteria. These students were then matched with students not identified by this procedure on age, grade, and sex. Results indicated that the identified students received a higher average score on the checklist than their matched controls. Although this study did not examine the accuracy of the teacher's judgement in identifying behavior problem children, it is the first study that demonstrated convergence between teacher ratings of child behavior and an external measure of behavioral disturbance.

A study by Young-Maston (1938) was the first attempt to specifically examine the accuracy of teacher judgements of child behavior by direct observational data. The observational procedure did not discriminate between students selected by teachers as average behaved and worst behaved in their

classrooms. However, Bolstad and Johnson (1977) have noted methodological problems in the manner the behavioral data were collected that may partly account for the lack of convergent validity in this early study.

Nelson (1971) used behavioral observation in the classroom to examine differences between children identified as "conduct-disturbed" or "normal" based upon ratings provided by their teachers. Results showed that normal subjects engaged in significantly more task-oriented behavior and significantly fewer deviant behavior than conduct-disturbed children. In a similar study Bolstad and Johnson (1977) provided support for the convergence of teacher nominations with the actual behavior of students. Teachers from two schools nominated boy and girl pairs from their classroom whom they would describe as "best behaved," "average behaved," and "worst behaved" in terms of classroom conduct. Behavioral observations of the nominated children and reading achievement scores were collected. The data indicated that the worst behaved children attended significantly less and had significantly lower academic achievement scores than the remaining two groups in both schools sampled. In addition, in one of the two schools the worst behaved group demonstrated less appropriate peer interaction and less independent work than the combined best and average behaved groups. On an additional four behaviors measured, the groups did not differ.

In summary, the available data provide some support for the validity of teacher's judgement of child disruptive behavior. The purpose of the present study was to extend the studies by Nelson (1971) and Bolstad and Johnson (1977) to include teacher identification of withdrawn children as well as conduct problem children. Although withdrawn children are frequently not identified as manifesting adjustment problems, Combs and Slaby (1977) have recently delineated a number of difficulties (e.g., delinquency, school

dropouts, adult mental health problems) associated with social withdrawal. The need exists to determine if teachers can identify this type of problem children. The present study also extended the earlier studies by assessing the accuracy of teacher nominations of problem children not only by way of behavioral and academic achievement data but also peer sociometric measures. The available data indicate that neither aggressive/disruptive children nor withdrawn children are liked by peers (Combs & Slaby), 1977), suggesting that both teacher-nominated groups should differ from nonproblem children on peer sociometric measures.

Method

Subjects

Ninety-five third graders from five classrooms in a rural Southeast school district participated in this study. The mean age for all children was 9.45 years, and the range was 8.4 to 11.6 years. Children who were in classrooms for the educable and trainable mentally retarded and one deaf child were excluded from the data analyses. All children were Caucasian except for two black children.

Instruments and Procedures

Teacher measures. Teachers nominated each child in their class as normal, a conduct problem, or a withdrawal problem. Representative descriptions of both types of problem children were obtained from Ross, Lacey, and Evans (1965) and given to each teacher. The following description of a conduct problem child was distributed to teachers.

> All teachers have several children who are regular discipline problems. These children show their anger by such things as abusive language, pushing, hitting, fighting, and destroying property. This child's behavior may also involve less open acts of anger, such as knocking someone's books on the floor, making faces at someone, or trying to get others into trouble.

Usually these are children who you've tried all kinds of discipline with and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't! Please nominate any child in your room who fits this description.

For the withdrawal problem child the description was as follows: Another type of child regularly seen in classrooms is the withdrawn child. This child is shy and prefers to be alone most of the time. This child will seldom speak up for himself. If this child becomes the center of attention he or she appears uncomfortable. This child avoids assuming any type of leadership and may appear sad, fearful, and easy to offend. Please nominate any child in your room who fits this description.

The normal child represented any child not nominated for one of the problem child categories.

Sociometric Measures. The sociometric devices used were the peer acceptance and rejection techniques and the peer rating technique. All questionnaires were administered in a group setting in each classroom. For the rejection sociometric a list of the children in the classroom was distributed and each child was asked to circle the names of three children (s)he did not especially like. For the peer acceptance sociometric a similar list was distributed and each child was asked to circle the names of three children (s)he considered to be his/her best friends.

For the peer rating technique another form with a five point Likert scale was handed to the children. The use of the five point scale was explained using examples of food (e.g., "How much do you like ice cream.) All class members were listed underneath the scale. They were instructed to circle one, and only one, rating for each child. The greater the score on the scale, the more that child was disliked.

The peer rejection score was the total number of children who picked that child as someone they don't like divided by the total number of children in that child's classroom. The peer acceptance score was the total number of children who picked that child as a best friend divided by the total number of children in that child's classroom. For the peer rating score each child's score was the summation of the other children's ratings of him/her divided by the total number of children in that child's classroom. These procedures generate a standard score for each child based on the number of children in each child's classroom.

Behavioral Observations. Five trained observers and two reliability checkers coded behavior in the classroom. All observers were trained to a minimum criterion of 80% reliability for each behavior category using videotapes and observing other classrooms. A sequential time sampling procedure following Gottman's (1977) recommendation was used. A child was observed in the classroom during free time and instruction for six 10-second intervals after which the next child on a list in the classroom was observed. Observers kept track of the intervals using a cassette tape recorder with a tape recording of 10 sec. intervals by number (e.g., "one-two-three . .", etc.). For reliability, which was checked 30% of the time, a split earplug was used so that both persons were listening to the same tape. After obtaining one minute of observation for each child, observers returned to the head of the list and continued to observe children until at least 8 minutes of observation per child were obtained.

Behavioral categories were similar to categories used in the Hartup, Glazer, and Charlesworth (1967) and Gottman (1977) studies. The categories were divided into either On-Task Alone, Teacher Interaction, or Peer Interaction. The On-Task Alone category consisted of child behavior such as

working at one's desk or attending to the teacher's instructions. Alone On-Task was scored if the child was engaged in this behavior at the initiation of each 10 second interval. Teacher Interaction represented one to one interaction between the teacher (or the teacher aide) and child and was coded into one of two categories. Nonaversive Teacher Interaction represented either neutral (e.g., teacher hands child material) or positive interaction (e.g., teacher compliments child or helps child with assignment). Aversive Teacher Interaction consisted of such behaviors as the teacher reprimanding a child or a child whining to a teacher. Teacher Interaction was coded if a child and teacher engaged in the behavior anytime during a 10 second interval.

Peer Interaction was coded as either positive or negative. Positive Peer Interaction consisted of such behaviors as receiving positive attention or approval from another child, smiling or laughing with another child, general conversation, or participating appropriately in a game of activity. Negative Peer Interaction consisted of such behaviors as pushing or hitting another child, ignoring or rejecting another child, and interfering with another child's materials. Peer interaction was coded if a child and peer engaged in the behavior anytime during a 10 second interval.

Scores were computed for each behavior by summing the total frequency of occurrence of each and dividing by the number of 10 second intervals for that particular child. Thus, each score represents a proportion of the total 10 second intervals during which the behavior occurred.

Reliability was assessed interval by interval and computed by the following formula: number of agreements/number of agreements plus disagreements.

Academic scores. Reading, math, and language arts scores from the Metropolitan Achievement Test grade-equivalent scores were available for fall and spring of the academic year. For each of the three scores a total was computed by summing across fall and spring. Subsequently, an overall "academic" score was calculated by summing across the scores for the three academic subjects.

Results

Reliability data calculated for the behavioral coding system was: Alone On-Task, 79%; Nonaversive Teacher Interaction, 97%; Aversive Teacher Interaction, 98%; Peer Interaction Positive, 90%; and Peer Interaction Negative, 98%.

Of the 95 children, 16 were nominated as a conduct problem and 14 as a withdrawal problem. Table 1 presents the mean for each dependent variable for each of three groups. A one way analysis of variance with Groups representing the independent variable was performed on each dependent variable.

Table 1 about here

The F value resulting from these analyses is also presented in Table 1 as are individual comparisons for the significant F values.

The results of the sociometric measures indicate that children nominated by teachers as being normal were accepted more, rejected less, and liked more by peers than conduct problem children and withdrawn children. The behavioral observation data indicated that children nominated as conduct problems interacted negatively with peers significantly more than children in either of the two remaining groups. Furthermore, the observational data suggest that both the nominated withdrawn and conduct problem children interact more with the teacher than the nominated normal children. Finally, the children nominated as normal had significantly higher academic achievement scores than either of the two groups of children nominated as problems.

Discussion

The results of this study further collaborate teacher's judgements of problem children using independent criteria. As in one of Bolstad and Johnson's (1977) two samples of children, the conduct problem children in the present study interacted more negatively or inappropriately with peers

than did the normal children. However, in contrast to Bolstad and Johnson's results, the present data did not indicate that conduct problem children are on-task (attending) less than normal children. Nevertheless, it would appear that conduct problem children do interact more with the teacher than normal children. This finding supports recent evidence that the interactive frequency between teachers and deviant children is quantitatively and qualitatively different compared to nondeviant children (Bryan, 1978; Walker & Buckley, 1973). Finally, as in the Bolstad and Johnson investigation, conduct problem children displayed lower academic achievement than normal children.

The use of sociometric measures provided strong additional data to support the accuracy of teacher nominations. On all three sociometric instruments conduct problem children were less liked or popular than normal children. It would appear that the behaviors of conduct problem children, such as interacting negatively with peers, may well lead to these children being rejected. Of primary importance here is the collaborative evidence for teacher nominations provided by the sociometric measures.

When teacher nominations of withdrawn children are considered, the behavioral data provide minimum evidence for the accuracy of teacher perceptions of this type of child. Although the withdrawn children actually appear to interact more with the teacher than the normal children, no significant differences emerged between the two groups. However, when one considers both academic and sociometric data, differences do emerge. Withdrawn children have a significantly lower academic achievement level and are liked significantly less than normal children. These data suggest that children nominated by teachers as withdrawn do differ from normal children and do appear to have social and academic difficulties. The failure for behavioral differences to emerge between the two groups may be a function

of the rather global coding system employed. The need to identify exactly what behaviors constitute social withdrawal in children is evident.

It is interesting to note that children nominated for conduct problems and withdrawal problems did not differ significantly on any of the outcome measures. These data would suggest that teachers may be accurate in terms of identifying problem children but less accurate in terms of differentiating between different types of problem children.

In summary, teachers can identify children who are having difficulties in the classroom. Children identified by teachers appear to have peer acceptance, academic, and, at least in the case of conduct problem children, behavior problems. Finally, no evidence was generated to suggest that teachers can differentiate between conduct and withdrawal problems.

Footnotes

1. This research was supported in part by NIMH grant MH-28859-01. Data reported in this article are part of a larger project assessing the social skills of children. Reprint requests should be addressed to Rex Forehand, Psychology Department, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602.

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Table 1

Means, F-Level, and Individual Comparisons Between the Teacher Nominated Groups and Each Dependent Variable

Dependent Variable	Normal (N)	Conduct Problem (C)	Withdrawal Problem (W)	F[a] Value	Significant Individual Comparisons
Sociometric					
Peer Acceptance	.15	.09	.08	4.36**	N > C, N > W
Peer rejection	.07	.16	.19	5.99**	C > N, W > N
Peer rating	2.06	2.48	2.61	5.79**	C > N, W > N
Behavioral Observation					
Alone on task	31%	35%	29%	.29	
Nonaversive Teacher interaction	27%	47%	48%	3.32*	No Differences
Aversive Teacher interaction	04%	07%	03%	1.28	
Peer interaction positive	60%	55%	32%	2.05	
Peer interaction negative	05%	13%	05%	2.77*	C > N, C > W
Academic					
Total academic score	23.48	18.80	17.76	5.53***	N > C N > W

a = df 2,92 ** p < .01
* p ≤ .05 *** p < .005